

THE CLEVELAND
MUSEUM OF ART
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**EXHIBITION OF FINE PRINTS FROM THE BELGIAN AVANT-GARDE OF 100 YEARS
AGO COMES TO THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART**

While most exhibitions dealing with the work of a particular school or group coalesce around clear stylistic similarities shared by the artists, *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde: Prints, Drawings, and Books ca. 1890*, on view July 13 through September 5, 1993, at The Cleveland Museum of Art, offers instead a wide variety of creative and technical approaches. The group calling itself Les XX (Les Vingt, French for "The Twenty") was formed, not around a particular aesthetic philosophy, but as a reaction against the rigidity of the formal salons and academies in Belgium that set the stylistic norms of the day.

Formed in Brussels in late 1883 and disbanded ten years later, Les XX claimed as members most of the important Belgian artists working in the last two decades of the 19th century – James Ensor, Théo van Rysselberghe, Fernand Khnopff, Georges Lemmen, Henry van de Velde, Félicien Rops, and Jan Toorop. For their exhibitions, Les XX invited leading progressive artists from all over Europe, including Monet, Renoir, Seurat, and Whistler, and introduced into Belgium the most avant-garde art movements of the period – Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, Symbolism.

The group's unconstrained, sometimes abrasive spirit of adventurousness quickly made the annual exhibition of Les XX the most prestigious Belgian arts event with which a forward-looking artist could be associated. And these were indeed events – in addition to the works of visual art, exhibitions featured performances of new music, poetry readings, and heated discussions about politics and the role of art in society. Les XX encouraged cultural cross-pollination. Artists and important writers collaborated to produce books, and the works shown at Les XX salons quickly diversified to include furniture, rugs, china, jewelry, and other decorative objects not traditionally considered appropriate for exhibition as "fine art."

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Any organization founded by a group of anarchistic and rebellious spirits is bound to have its family tiffs, and Les XX's two prime figures, artist James Ensor and the group's secretary and *de facto* leader, Octave Maus, were often at odds over the membership and artistic direction of Les XX. But they needed each other: Maus published an important review, *L'Art Moderne*, which gave new ideas – particularly those of Les XX – powerful support; and without Ensor, who today is generally revered as the greatest Belgian artist of the last two centuries, Les XX would have had much less prestige. The fertile disharmony finally ended in 1893 when Maus dissolved Les XX and formed (minus Ensor) the larger, tamer La Libre Esthétique, which was run by a panel of critics and patrons of the arts rather than by artists, who, Maus complained, “squabbled among themselves.”

Featured in *Les XX and the Belgian Avant-Garde* are about 30 powerful and sometimes disturbing prints and drawings by Ensor; *art nouveau* posters by van de Velde and Van Rhysselberghe; atmospheric landscapes by Knopff and William Degouve de Nuncques; over a dozen (many of them frightening) etchings by Rops; and numerous books and decorative objects created wholly or in part by many of those same artists. Altogether, 137 prints and drawings and 22 books by 26 artists are gathered to demonstrate the importance of Les XX as a breeding ground for new ideas, and as an early, key champion of the radical artistic movements of the period.

This exhibition was organized by Stephen Goddard, curator of prints and drawings for The Spencer Museum at the University of Kansas, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. The Cleveland showing is supported by a grant from the Ohio Arts Council.